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Washington, D.C. -- The Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) will begin adjudicating compensation claims for Gulf War veterans with undiagnosed illnesses in all 58 of VA's regional benefits offices, a move to speed processing.

Under the change, all regional offices will adjudicate the claims of Gulf War veterans' reporting exposures to environmental hazards and toxins, to include those with undiagnosed illnesses. VA will phase in the redistribution so 9,700 cases currently pending at four area processing offices will be returned in stages to regional offices by June 1. VA established the previous policy of consolidating the processing of Gulf War claims based on exposure to environmental hazards or toxins at the area processing offices to build expertise in applying special rules for undiagnosed illnesses and ensure uniformity in evaluating the claims.

In explaining the reversal, VA Secretary Jesse Brown said, "We have traveled the country in recent months holding numerous town hall meetings for Gulf War veterans. One thing we heard clearly is that veterans want access to VA employees in their local region who are making these decisions important to their future and their family's future. We have gained considerable experience with undiagnosed illness and other environmental hazards claims. The value of the referral process is now outweighed by the efficiency of well-trained local adjudicators," Brown added.

Most ill Gulf War veterans have diagnosed disabilities. Only a small percentage are found to have debilitating, chronic symptoms that are not explained by conventional diagnoses and are among those to whom a special 1995 "undiagnosed illness" compensation regulation applies. A regulatory amendment that took effect April 29, 1997, extended through the year 2001 the time period during which undiagnosed illnesses may appear and be eligible for disability compensation.

That policy change is prompting another look at more than 4,000 claims that previously were denied when symptoms did not first appear within the prior manifestation window, which was two years after the date the individual Gulf War veteran left the Persian Gulf theater.

In addition to reviewing possible new undiagnosed illnesses claims, the four area processing offices (Louisville, Philadelphia, Phoenix, and Nashville) already had been re-reviewing previously denied cases to ensure that veterans have been adequately encouraged to look for supporting documentation, that proper weight was being given to lay evidence, and that information was being correctly entered into a special tracking system.

With the added workload arising from these factors, VA found the operations of the area processing offices increasingly strained. The aim of the policy change is to improve timely action on Gulf War veterans' claims.

VA encourages Gulf War veterans who have health problems to contact their local VA medical centers if they have not already sought treatment or had the free Persian Gulf Registry health examination. If symptoms are chronic and disabling, a veteran may request forms necessary to initiate a compensation claim by calling VA's toll-free benefits line, 800-827-1000. More than 66,000 Gulf War veterans' claims for service-connection have been approved, with more than 28,000 of those having illnesses serious enough to warrant monthly disability payments. Most service-connected Gulf War veterans have conventional medical conditions, but 800 receive compensation benefits based on undiagnosed illnesses.

Gulf War veterans can get general information about the health services and benefits to which they are entitled by calling 800-PGW-VETS (749-8387).